THE PRINCIPLES OF THE COLLECTION

The first mistake when being shown an artist's personal collection is to think that it is the key to their work, the secret revelation of artistic sources that would otherwise remain invisible.

One quickly discovers that the artist's collection is not at all unconscious or unintended, and proceeds deliberately and in full awareness of what they are doing. Works may be chosen not merely for their aesthetic influence, but for hopeful, deceptive, even antipathetic reasons. The artist's collection is not to be taken straight, but as a kind of argument or manifesto, an interpretation of their work that is as open to dispute as any other.

It is certainly this that must be kept in mind when encountering the collection of Pablo Picasso, on exhibition at the Gallery of Modern Art from June 6.

When Picasso died in 1973, the paintings left in his studio were gifted to the French State in lieu of death duties. These were complemented by another set of works when Picasso's estate was finally settled in 1978 and by various gifts over the years from Picasso's children and heirs.

Later still in 1992 Picasso's archive of some 200,000 letters, photos and manuscripts was gathered together and donated. Together with the paintings, they form the holdings of the Musée Picasso in Paris, which first opened in 1992 and is the principal lender to this show.

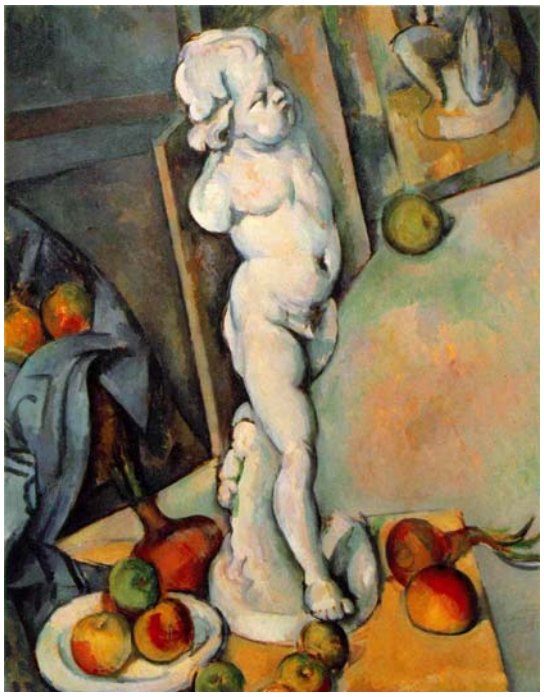
The first exhibition of Picasso's private collection took place in 1978, and provoked a tremendous public reaction. Critics were upset by Picasso's copying of other artists' works, by the state in which he kept the works he acquired and by his seeming lapses in taste. They appeared especially shocked by the omission of artists whom they felt should have been there, as though Picasso had some duty properly to document his sources.

But this is not at all a duty we should foist upon Picasso. Rather, like any museum exhibition, we must see his collection as representing only a particular point of view. And, on this level, Picasso's collection is a great success: he at once excludes artists whom we think should be included (Goya, Manet, Van Gogh) and includes artists whom we think should be left out (Le Nain, Corot, Rousseau). And, amongst it all, he reveals the unexpected sources of a number of works (the Torres Strait headdress that can be seen in *The Kiss* and *Three Dancers*, both of 1925).

Moreover, beyond the fact that it is not the key to his work but more like another work of art itself, there is another precaution we should keep in mind when we think of Picasso's collection as somehow containing his sources.

Take, for example, the strongest and longest-running of all influences upon Picasso, that of Paul Cézanne. There are three works by Cézanne here, but let us look instead at the relationship between undoubtedly Picasso's greatest painting,

Les Demoiselles d'Avignon (1907), and a work by Cézanne that Picasso would have seen during the period 1904-6, _Still Life with Plaster Cast_ (1895).



A typical art-historical account would look in _Demoiselles_ at the way the breasts of the woman standing to the right can appear either to be pointing towards the viewer or turned towards the left, or the way the woman sitting to the right can appear either to be facing away from the viewer with her legs open or turned towards the left with her right hand on her hip.

We would note that what allows this Cubist shifting back and forth in orientation is the technique of _passage_: depending on how the body parts are seen, the various lines that divide them up either mark out spaces that lie next to each other laterally or recede behind each other in depth.

We would then look at how the possibility of the same line being read in both of these ways can be seen in Cézanne's _Still Life_, in which the boundary that marks the right-hand side of the tablecloth belongs also to the space of the painting leaning against the wall of the studio behind it. Or, in an even more direct way, we can see it in the curls and notches of the tablecloth itself, we at once are mere decorative elements lying flat on a surface and are meant to indicate the successive foldings of the tablecloth in space.

As we say, there could never be a more obvious example of the influence of Cézanne upon Picasso. There could never be a more compelling justification for the museological method of hanging one painting next to another in order to make clear the development of a style or technique.

And yet this is not at all what is at stake in the relationship between Picasso and Cézanne, or at least it is to miss half of it. Recall here one of Picasso's famous aphorisms – and he was a great explainer of his work – "I don't borrow, I steal".

Picasso is telling us that it is not a matter of him being influenced by Cézanne, as though he had an incomplete vision that required resolution by another or as though he had partially resolved an artistic problem and Cézanne was waiting there patiently to be used.

He is suggesting the opposite: that the meaning of Cézanne's work exists only as an effect of it being taken up by him. For how could we ever have seen this potential in Cézanne except through the eyes of Picasso? Again, it is not merely a matter of Picasso being influenced by another artist, but of Picasso like a great critic or curator pointing out a connection between works that would otherwise have gone unnoticed.

Indeed, the paradoxical thing about really original artists is that they appear to have been influenced by everybody. As the shelf full of books tracing his supposed sources would tell us, implicitly the whole of the history of art would be found in Picasso's personal collection.

However, it is equally true that Picasso "creates" these influences, which do not exist before him. If early on in his career Picasso rejected Ingres and Renoir, later on he turned to them to help him develop his more academic style of the 1920s. Picasso, that is, changes not only the future of art but also its past: it is only through Picasso that we can see the connection between such seemingly disparate aesthetics as Ingres' Neo-Classicism, Renoir's Rococoism and Cézanne's post-Impressionism.

These considerations, which can seem rather abstract and academic, can actually lead to quite heated real-world debates. Take, for example, Picasso's relationship to African and Oceanic art, which is evidenced in this exhibition by a series of masks from Mali and the Ivory Coast and wood carvings from New Caledonia. African sculpture enters Picasso's work as an "influence" as early as 1906 when Matisse gave him a "fetish" from Central Africa, and the next year he added African masks to two of the women in *Demoiselles*.

It has been a very difficult question for Western art historians of how to think about the influence of "primitive" art upon Western art. In 1984 the Museum of Modern Art put on an important show called *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art,* seeking to bring out what it called the "affinities" between modern and tribal art.

It was a show that was strenuously criticised for reducing Non-Western art to Western terms, as though the only value this art had was to serve as source material for a series of European modernists.

Is this what we must think of the masks, headdresses and carvings in Picasso's collection here? Is it simply a case of them being of interest to us only insofar as they find themselves being taken up by Picasso?

Against the critics of the *'Primitivism'* show, we would argue that it is never a matter of us seeing Non-Western art in its own terms, of seeking to avoid comparisons with what we know. These comparisons are absolutely inevitable, and invariably sneak back into even the most anthropologically-sensitive accounts.

But, against those who argue for some "affinity" between the two types of art, we would say that, when we look at how Picasso actually used African art in his work, it is always to signal its alterity, the way it contests the categories he brings to bear upon it.

In each of these ways – his self-consciousness about influence, the two-sided nature of influence and the figuring of otherness within influence – Picasso makes difficult the usual conception of the relationship between an artist and their sources. As much as anything, Picasso's work constitutes an *argument* with its influences: he does not so much assume them as question or interrogate them.

There is undoubtedly a kind of doubling or reiteration between Picasso's art and the museum that houses it: Picasso's work is at once in art history and about art history, is at once art and a critique of art. It is, we might say, at the same time modern and post-modern.

However, the final irony is that by the time Picasso dies, this whole conception of art was not far from being over. If Picasso's art is about art and makes its points through art, art today is no longer like this.

Even if Picasso's art argues with its sources, these sources are nevertheless still important. This is how the work makes its meaning, and thus the whole museological project of identifying and deciphering these sources is ultimately necessary.

But today in a world of the internet, youtube and search engines, there are no possible boundaries that can any more be drawn around art. There can be no meaningful elaboration of its sources. Art no longer comes out of art and therefore no longer properly belongs to either the collection or the museum.

It is perhaps in this sense, finally, that not just Picasso's art but his collection *do* belong to the museum: they are both things of the past. Today the museum is no longer governed by the principles of selection and curation as embodied by connoisseurship, but by distraction and entertainment as exemplified by the click of a mouse.

Rex Butler